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Atari Online News, Etc.
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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Another long week, it seems. The weather hasn't been too bad although we're experiencing some "nuisance" weather lately - snow and rain, aided by a lot of stiff winds. Just enough to tick you off, but not much you can do about it. Everything will likely freeze up tonight and just make for a slippery mess in the morning. Will Spring ever get here?

Lots of stuff going on around the world, especially in the Middle East. The time has come for many of the tiny despots to get their just desserts and be forced out of office, or worse. We'll just have to wait things out, aided by images and news from the internet, etc.

I don't have much to add this week, and a little pressed for time, as usual. So, let's just skip the commentary for this week and dive right into this week's issue. You just know that something huge will happen over the next week to capture my imagination!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Another week has come and gone and, miracle of miracles, here's another column.

I just wish I didn't have to admit something right off the bat. I know it'll be

a surprise to you [chuckle] and I really hate to admit it, but I was [gasp] wrong.

Last week I talked about the revolution in Egypt and how technology was affecting it. I mentioned twitter and the internet as ways that information was

getting out at the speed of light and "spreading revolution" elsewhere.

Well, that is true: From Egypt, the unrest spread to Iran, then to Bahrain, and now to Libya. Yes, the internet certainly has something to do with that. The availability of sending and receiving information almost instantaneously is a wonderful and powerful thing but, as with all things, there's a down-side.

The downside is that we get accustomed to that constant flow of information. That's not to say that all the information is vital or important; far from it.

Usually, the info is... well, drivel. It's the kind of unimportant 'clutter' that you would get at a party after all the important stuff has been covered and people are just talking to talk... filling the silence.

Last week I mentioned Twitter, but there's also FaceBook and MySpace and a slew of blogs and websites that offer more of the same generally unimportant chatter just to fill the void... just because the 'space' is there to be filled.

But that hasn't been the case for some of the bandwidth this past week. I forgot one of the most important facets of the internet... the ability to firewall.

Remember the "Great Firewall of China"? It was/is a cute name for a restraint and intrusion, and despite the possibility of a few people getting around it, it has and continues to block access to huge portions of the internet for a huge number of people.

Well that's the part I forgot about. Shortly after I wrote last week's column, I saw a story on the news about Egypt shutting down or curtailing access to the internet. Then the same thing happened in Iran, then in Bahrain and then in Libya.

Certainly, these guys thought more about it than I did. Of course, my petty dictatorship and physical well-being were not hanging in the balance, nor were billions of dollars in accumulated assets... all of which the leaders of these countries could lose when/if things go badly for them.

That made me stop and think; maybe the way to deal with "these people"... meaning these leaders... is to cut off not their money or their access to other like-minded individuals in power in other countries, but to do with the internet what has been done with radio signals since World War II... Radio was used as a huge source of propaganda for a long time. From Radio-Free Europe to broadcasts like Tokyo Rose to Voice of America, radio was a powerful tool and, while its effectiveness may be questioned by some, a lot of people put a lot of effort into both transmitting and receiving radio broadcasts.

Today, radio is pretty much "old school". Unless messages are spoken in code, anyone with a receiver can hear it. The only option, really, is to talk in a code that only your compatriots know about. And even then, only a small amount

of data can be transmitted that way.

But we have the internet now. Access to info and news has never been easier. And while not everyone has broadband, the tech-savvy should be able to go about their business fairly easily. The bigger problem is that its easier for everyone. As our reliance on computers and the internet grows, so does the power we give it. If the government of Iran, for instance, decides that its citizens are becoming a problem and that the internet is fueling them with un-Muslim ideas and values, all it has to do is clamp down on access to the internet. Those citizens who've become so accustomed to accessing the 'net for everything will, at least for a time, be 'lost'. It truly is a double-edged sword.

But, friends and neighbors, that's not the whole story either. We've come a long way from CompuServe and Delphi email. Remember those days? It was something amazing back then... to think that you could 'mail' someone half way around the world and have them get it in a matter of minutes... even if it was only within CompuServe or Delphi or GEnie or <gasp> Prodigy.

Today we take it for granted that we can send email around the world instantly... even from our cell phones. But what happens when we can't for some reason? For a while, the court system here wasn't allowing jurors to bring their cell phones with them if they had cameras... and almost all cell phones have cameras these days. You should see the outrage some people display when told that their 'rights' are being taken away... I actually found it mildly amusing... until I realized that MY cell phone had a camera.

Anyway, back to the internet as a tool of revolution:

Today, there's not only straight-out email. There's tweeting and facebooking and whatever else; there are also things like steganography and encryption that can be used.

In its most popular form (as far as I know), steganography is basically taking text and hiding it inside the data of a picture file. If you want to hide data, you can do it that way and put it up on a website or email it to someone. Anyone who doesn't know its there would have a hard time finding it.

But my most favorite way of hiding data is real, 'even-the-NSA-has-trouble-breaking-it' encryption. There must be other programs out there that do the same thing, but my favorite right now is a program called Truecypt (http://www.truecrypt.com).

It allows you to create sort of a virtual drive that uses the most 'state of the

art’ encryption methods, and can use them together.

Now, you can’t disguise this ’container’ to make it look like a jpeg picture or anything, but the fact remains that its almost uncrackable. There’s even a way to use it to encrypt your whole system.

The problem is that you need passwords (at least 20 characters long is best), and passwords need to be remembered or there needs to be some sort of ’scheme’ for knowing the password. Regardless, there ARE ways to use computers in today’s conflicts for us, ranging from steganography and encryption to the less ’sexy’ but more effective emailing, blogging, TXT’ing and tweeting.

Will it really make any difference? Can the digital revolution reinforce any of these revolutions? I guess we’ll see. Let’s hope that it’s the ’good guys’ rather than the bad guys that have the savvy and the knowledge to use computers and the internet to the best advantage.

Well, that’s it for this week, friends and neighbors. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week’s Gaming Section - Yar’s Revenge Gets Makeover!
"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" ’Legend of Zelda’ Hits 25!
Sony Cuts PSP Price!
And much more!

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->A-ONE’s Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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Yars’ Revenge: Hands On with Atari’s Updated Shooter

Atari continues its recent trend of updating classic properties for modern audiences with "Yars’ Revenge," a reimagining of the 1980’s arcade classic. Instead of giving the game a simple HD overhaul, Atari

built the game from the ground up as an on-rails shooter with biomechanical graphics and anime-inspired gameplay.

Developed by Killspace Entertainment, "Yars' Revenge" puts players in the role of a nameless female member of the Yar race who has been brainwashed and enslaved by the evil Qotile. After being shot down and rescued by a mysterious Yar, she sets off on a revenge mission against her former master.

The protagonist holds heavy heat including a pulse laser, rail gun, and lock-on missiles. Defense-minded gamers will be happy to know that the regenerative shield returns from the original title. Other power-ups become available as you make your way through the game. As with other modern shooters, a point multiplier is available for aces who successful create chains of destruction.

"Yars' Revenge" features lots of enemy-blasting action that manages to enthrall despite the somewhat slow pacing. It features graphics that capture the essence of the biomechanical world and wow with the anime-quality still images and missile swarms.

"Yars' Revenge" is a downloadable PlayStation Network and Xbox Live Arcade title that should appeal to fans of "Panzer Dragoon," "Rez," or "Sin and Punishment," thanks to the fixed camera angle and loads of enemies to blow up. "Yars' Revenge" will feature two-player local co-op, but no online co-op. The game will be available in early 2011.

'The Legend of Zelda' Celebrates 25 Years

Today, "The Legend of Zelda" reaches a milestone. Twenty-five years ago, the game first debuted in Japan. Released in the U.S. 18 months later, the iconic franchise has since spawned a number of spin-offs, in addition to a TV show, books, merchandise, and a cult-like fan following.

The world was first introduced to Link on Feb. 21, 1986 on Famicom, Japan's Nintendo console. It went on sale for the NES in the U.S. the following year. In the quarter century since the game first appeared, more than 15 official versions of The Legend of Zelda have been released on all of Nintendo's consoles.

Created by legendary game designer Shigeru Miyamoto, who is also behind the Mario Brothers series, The Legend of Zelda has sold more than 59 million copies worldwide, and it's the fourth-best selling Nintendo game of all time, behind the first three Super Mario Brothers titles.

The most recent Zelda title, Spirit Tracks, was released in December of 2009 for Nintendo DS. Nintendo is set to release an additional Zelda title called Skyward Sword later this year.

Nintendo celebrated the 25th anniversary of Super Mario Brothers, another one of the company's iconic franchises. When it was first released in 1985, the game sold more than 40 million units worldwide.

Zelda's notable anniversary has prompted nostalgia around the Web. Gaming site 1UP has posted an all-encompassing retrospective of the game's 25 years, including roundups of the best Zelda commercials, Zelda merchandise, and 25 facts you didn't know about the game.

Sony Cuts PSP Price to $130 Ahead of NGP

Getting in front of its next-generation PSP, not due until year's end, Sony today announced it's slashing the price of its PlayStation Portable gaming handheld. Starting Sunday, February 27, you'll be able to pick up a PSP-3000 (that's the standard version with UMD drive) for $130, a nearly 25 percent drop from the original $170.

Last October, Sony dropped its slide-top, spindle-free, downloads-only PSP Go from $250 to $200. Still too expensive for my money, but then the Go never grabbed me anyway. Final Fantasy Tactics, one of my favorites, isn't available as a downloadable game, and with the Go's tiny 3.8-inch screen, playing the sort of 4:3 format PSOne games I'm into on the device, e.g. Final Fantasy's VII, VIII, and IX, simply isn't happening.

The upside of buying a PSP-3000 now is that any games you purchase as downloads should work with the NGP when it hits around the holidays. The same applies to the PSPgo, of course, but why pay $70 more for the PSP-3000's smaller, less functionally appealing shadow?

In the meantime, I'm getting tired of calling the PSP2 an "NGP." I suppose it's better than "Project Natal," but you know what else NGP stands for, right? Neo Geo Pocket? Negotiated Guilty Plea? Neighborhood Gossiping Problem?

I rest my case.

Smithsonian Holds Vote on Video Games for Exhibit

The Smithsonian American Art Museum is asking the public to help select video games that will be included in its first exhibit to explore the art and visual effects of gaming.

The exhibit, "The Art of Video Games," is scheduled to open in March 2012 with a focus on the evolution of games as an artistic medium over the past 40 years.

The public can vote online through April 7. Voters can choose 80 games from a pool of 240 choices in various categories. The games on the site were chosen for their graphic appeal, artistic intent and innovative game designs. Results will be posted in May.

The winning games will be displayed at the museum next year as screen shots or short video clips.

Donations Pour in for PS3 Hacker; Sony Court Battle Continues

George Hotz is in the middle of what could be a long, punishing legal battle with Sony, and his money is running out. "Media, I need your help. This is the first time I have ever asked. Please, if you support this cause,

help me out and spread the word," he wrote on his newest blog entry. "I want, by the time this goes to trial, to have Sony facing some of the hardest hitting lawyers in the business. Together, we can help fix the system."

Ars Technica contacted Hotz's lawyer to make sure this plea for cash was legitimate, and attorney Stewart Kellar confirmed that yes, the money raised goes to Hotz's legal fund to fight Sony. It also appears Hotz has friends with deep pockets; the first round of fundraising is already over, and more lawyers will be hired for Hotz's defense.

"I am an advocate against mass piracy, do not distribute anyone's copyrighted work but my own, do not take crap lying down, and am even pro-DRM in a sense," Hotz said. But, while companies like Apple have the right to lock down their iPhones at the factory, Hotz believes that consumers should be able to do what they like. "Once it's paid for and mine, I have the right to unlock it, smash it, jailbreak it, look at it, and hack on it," he wrote. "Fortunately, the courts agree with me on this point."

Recently Hotz also took to YouTube to rap at Sony. A quick sample of the lyrics:

> I shed a tear everytime I think of Lik Sang / But sh*t man, they're a corporation / And I'm a personification of freedom for all / You fill dockets, like that's a concept foreign to y'all / While lawyers muddy water and TROs stall / Out of business is jail for me / And you're suing me civilly

Geohot raps (NSFW)

Hotz assured everyone that despite the rapping, he's serious about raising money to fight back. "Clearly I am not being sued because of something I have that Sony wants; I am being sued in order to send a message that Sony is not to be messed with," he said. "But if I (and all co-defendants likewise) actually win this, we have the power to send a much stronger message back. That consumers have rights, and we aren't afraid to stand up for them."

Hotz painted a picture of a company that uses its resources and legal team to bully anyone it doesn't like into submission. "Sony tried to sue a guy for getting his AIBO to do non-Sony approved tricks, making it apparent that they don't really care about piracy, they care about control," he added.

Since the donations page has gone up, Hotz has met his first goal and will be adding more lawyers to his legal team. For those without money to donate, Hotz is still asking for support. "Let people know how Sony treats customers," he wrote. "Let people know Sony would rather sue than be proactive and try to fix the problem. Let people know about laws like the DMCA which stifle innovation, and don't do anything to fix the problems they were created to solve."

If Sony offered to settle, Hotz has terms in mind: he wants the OtherOS option back on the PlayStation 3, and he wants a public apology from Sony. He's also willing to trade "a legit path to homebrew for knowledge of how to stop new firmwares from being decrypted." With a fresh infusion of funding and the attention of the media, Sony may find a more formidable opponent in Hotz than it expected.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Senate Democrats Slam House Efforts To Derail Net Neutrality Rules

Senate Democrats on Wednesday voiced their opposition to a House amendment that would stop funding for the Federal Communications Commission's net neutrality rules.

Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts joined with Sens. Ron Wyden of Oregon, Maria Cantwell of Washington, and Al Franken of Minnesota to write a letter to Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and Minority Leader Mitch McConnell that opposed using the appropriations process or the Congressional Review Act to keep the FCC from implementing its network neutrality rules.

"The final network neutrality rules, to the credit of Chairman Genachowski, are built on things everyone should support - transparency of broadband service operations, no blocking of legal content and websites, and nondiscrimination against or for specific firms or people trying to communicate and compete over the Internet," they wrote. "Unfortunately, the House has decided that it knows better what is good for the Internet than the people who use, fund, and work on it."

Last week, the House approved an amendment to a spending bill that would halt funding for the net neutrality rules,which were approved in December. It passed with a vote of 244 to 181, with 10 Democrats voting in favor of the amendment, and four Republicans voting against it.

Also last week, Republicans from both houses filed a joint resolution of disapproval that could overturn the new rules via a simple majority. The joint resolution of disapproval, part of the Congressional Review Act (CRA), would need to pass with a majority in both chambers, then survive a veto from President Obama, so the passage of the bill is unlikely.

The Democratic senators said they "object strongly" to the amendment and the joint resolution.

"Such action aims to strip the FCC of its legal authority over modern communications and hand control of the Internet over to the owners of the wires that deliver information and services over them," they wrote.

The senators said the net neutrality rules are "clearly in the public interest." Unless the Senate strikes the House amendment from the spending bill or rejects the CRA effort, telephone and cable companies will own the Internet, they wrote.

The main issue is whether the FCC has the authority to regulate broadband in the first place. In April, a court ruled that the FCC had no right to hand down a 2008 network management enforcement action against

Comcast, throwing the FCC's broadband authority into question. The FCC later maintained that it has authority via the Communications Act, but others disagree. Verizon and MetroPCS sued the FCC, arguing that it lacks the authority to regulate broadband.

On that point, several consumer groups - Free Press, Media Access Project, Media Mobilizing Project, Access Humboldt, and Mountain Area Information Network - filed motions on Tuesday, arguing that the Verizon and MetroPCS suits were "improperly brought"; something the FCC also argued.

"We hope the DC Circuit recognizes that the companies' suits are brought improperly and dismisses them, but we're filing today to preserve our rights to challenge the appeals if they're not dismissed outright," Aparna Sridhar, Free Press policy counsel, said in a statement. "We don't believe the FCC's order goes far enough to protect free speech online, but Verizon's and MetroPCS's efforts to ensure that the FCC has no role in protecting Internet users in the broadband marketplace are self-serving and dangerous."

Sridhar is not the only one who thought the FCC rules did not go far enough. In an effort to appease both sides, the FCC instead appeared to irk those most invested in the issue. Republicans swiftly vowed to take down the FCC rules, while Democrats like Sen. Franken argued that the final rules were too watered down.

In late January, Sen. Cantwell introduced a bill that would strengthen the FCC's net neutrality rules. It would create a new section in Title II of the Communications Act for the FCC's net neutrality principle, ban paid prioritization, require broadband providers to work with local and middle-mile partners on reasonable network management terms, and apply the rules equally to wireline and wireless providers.

New EU Antitrust Complaint Against Google

A French creator of specialized search engines on Tuesday filed a new complaint with the European Union about alleged anticompetitive behavior by Google Inc., a reminder of the regulatory hurdles the online search giant faces in the region.

The latest claim comes from 1plusV, which runs so-called vertical search engines that specialize in subject areas like law, music and culture.

It said that between 2006 and 2010 Google prevented companies using vertical search technology from using its online advertising service AdSense. 1plusV says Adsense is "the only truly effective way of obtaining targeted advertising on a search engine."

The strategy keeps alternative search providers from growing and competing with Google, 1plusV company said in a statement.

1plusV is the parent company of legal search engine eJustice.fr, which already complained to the EU last February, claiming Google unfairly removed it from its search results.

That complaint, along with others, triggered the European Commission, the EU's antitrust regulator, to launch an in-depth probe of Google's business practices in November.

The new complaint "brings to the notice of the Commission a series of new abuses ... as well as additional proof of the abuses already complained of last year," 1plusV said in a statement.

It said that in the weeks following its original complaint, Google retaliated by delisting other sites published by 1plusV. For eJustice.fr, Google's decision to remove it from its search results was "catastrophic in terms of its traffic," 1plusV said.

Google has said that ranking on its search results depends on how valuable a given site is for its users. It has in the past advised companies to improve their websites to help them move up in the results list.

But 1plusV said Tuesday that Google doesn't stick to that policy, noting some of the previously removed sites were relisted in December, even though they hadn't been modified.

"The relisting is in complete contradiction with the Google argument that eJustice.fr was delisted because it provided no value to the Internet user," 1plusV said, adding that the sites were relisted shortly after the Commission launched its investigation.

Google said Tuesday that it has been working closely with the Commission to explain its business model. "While we have always tried to do the right thing for our users and advertisers, we recognize that there's always room for improvement," the company said in a statement.

The Commission said that once it receives the new complaint it "will give Google the opportunity to comment on the allegations raised before deciding on what, if any, further steps to take."

If Google is found guilty of abusing its dominant position in the search-engine or advertising markets the Commission can fine it up to 10 percent of annual revenues, which reached $29 billion in 2010.

Microsoft 'Do Not Track' Plan Accepted by Web Standards Group W3C

Microsoft's "do not track" browser proposal got a boost Thursday when the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), a Web standards body, gave Microsoft's plan its stamp of approval.

The W3C has accepted and published Microsoft's submission, which W3C called "timely and well-aligned with the consortium's objectives and priorities." An official announcement is expected in early March, and W3C will hold a workshop at Princeton University on April 28 and 29 to assess whether W3C should proceed with more work in this area.

Microsoft Tracking Protection was included in the release candidate of Internet Explorer 9, which was announced earlier this month.

At the launch event for the RC, Microsoft also announced four partners for Tracking Protection: Abine, TRUSTe, PrivacyChoice, and AdBlock Plus. These firms will provide lists of sites that plant small tracking code on many other Web sites to profile users' site history and habits. The Tracking Protection feature in IE9, which was first introduced in

December, will allow users to block this snooping by either using one of these lists or automatically determining the offending Web domains.

W3C noted that while the technology behind "do not track" options is relatively simple, defining the real meaning of "track" for a global Internet is a complex issue.

"The privacy concerns from consumers and academics and governments world-wide have both technical and non-technical aspects. Addressing these concerns will involve technology," Dean Hachamovitch, corporate vice president for IE, wrote in a blog post. "The W3C's involvement provides the best forum possible for that technology discussion. Just as the community has worked together at the W3C on interoperable HTML5, we can now work together on an interoperable (or universal, to use the FTC privacy report's term) way to help protect consumers' privacy."

The feature is in response to the FTC's call for a Web equivalent to the Do Not Call list that addresses telemarketer harassment. In the wake of the FTC's report, Google and Mozilla have also introduced varying "do not track" options for their respective browsers.

Earlier this month, Rep. Jackie Speier introduced the Do Not Track Me Online Act of 2011, which would give the FTC 18 months to come up with standards for companies to follow when it comes to online tracking.

The i(Pad)s of March: Apple Plans Tablet Event

March Madness could take on a whole new meaning if Apple gives the world another iPad next week.

Apple Inc. is expected to unveil the second generation of its wildly successful media tablet, widening its head start against competitors just starting to sell their first tablet computers.

The Cupertino, Calif.-based company e-mailed invitations to a media event in San Francisco Wednesday that show a calendar page with the corner peeling away to reveal an iPad underneath. The large "2" on the calendar page denotes the event's March 2 date, but is also a hint that Apple is about to announce the follow-up to the original iPad.

The iPad, about the size of a large book, has been likened to an overgrown iPhone or iPod Touch, as it is powered by similar software and can run the same applications, or "apps."

But it has a bigger screen that makes reading e-mails, surfing the Web and watching movies easier on the eyes. With a starting price of $499, it's less expensive than many computers and, at 1.5 pounds, it also weighs less. Unlike small, inexpensive laptops such as netbooks, the iPad turns on instantly, so people don't have to wait through a sluggish boot-up. And the iPad also lasts about 10 hours unplugged, making it ideal for travelers and other people on the go.

Apple sold more than 15 million iPads in its first nine months on sale, including 7.3 million to holiday shoppers during the October-December quarter - about a million more for the quarter than analysts were expecting.

Since the iPad’s launch, other consumer electronics makers have been scrambling to develop tablets of their own. For example, Samsung Electronics Co. began selling the Galaxy Tab last year, and Motorola Mobility Inc.’s Xoom tablet goes on sale this week. Many of these new tablets run Google Inc.’s Android software.

The iPad is the first tablet computer to win over mainstream consumers. A decade earlier, PC makers were selling tablets that ran Windows, the same operating systems found on most full-fledged PCs. While some businesses bought them, they never sold well among consumers. These tablets were heavier and had shorter battery lives. They were also more difficult to use as touch-screen devices, as Windows was meant to be used with a mouse and keyboard. Apple’s iPad software, meanwhile, was designed from the start to be touched.

As usual, Apple has not said anything about the highly anticipated next version of the iPad, leaving rumors to swirl unchecked online. Some bloggers have speculated that the new iPad will have a front-facing camera, which would allow people to hold video chats using services such as Skype. If that were the case, its design would more closely match the iPhone 4, which went on sale last June with a front-facing camera and Apple’s own video chatting software, called FaceTime.

Others have speculated that the new iPad will be thinner and lighter than the original, and will come with a bigger built-in speaker.

Also Wednesday, Apple shareholders rejected a proposal that called for the company to disclose a succession plan for its chief executive. The rejection came a month after Apple CEO Steve Jobs went on an indefinite medical leave for unspecified problems - an absence that could be related to his previous bout with pancreatic cancer or his 2009 liver transplant. Apple announced the preliminary vote on the non-binding proposal at its annual shareholders meeting, but did not provide a breakdown.

Apple Takes Wraps Off New MacBook Pro Lineup

Apple Inc released its new lineup of MacBookPro notebook computers, featuring Intel’s peppy new processors andgraphics chips made by Advanced Micro Devices, helping boost the smaller chipmaker’s stock more than 5 percent.

The new MacBook Pros will be powered by Intel Corp’s latest dual-core and quad-core chips, which were previously code-named Sandy Bridge and include integrated graphics processing.

More expensive versions of the MacBook Pro also include graphics chips from Advanced Micro Devices for added performance. Graphics processors made by competitor Nvidia had been used in past versions of the MacBook Pro.

Apple’s trend-setting personal computers are a high-profile battleground for chipmakers Intel, AMD and Nvidia.

News of AMD’s presence in the new MacBook Pros helped boost its stock 5.5 percent to $9.02.

"It starts to show that the new AMD products have the potential to start to elevate their notebook share," said Cody Acree, an analyst at Williams Financial Group.

Intel supplied the MacBook Pro with a faster, compact input/output technology called Thunderbolt, which supports high-resolution displays and devices through a single port.

The price of a 13-inch MacBook Pro, with a full-size keyboard, seven-hour battery life and an aluminum casing, will start at $1,199. The 15-inch starts at $1,799 and the 17-inch is priced at $2,499.

Mac OS X Lion Adds Features from the iPhone’s iOS

Accompanying the release Thursday of new MacBook Pros, Apple unveiled a developer preview of its next Mac OS X, version 10.7 Lion. The upcoming OS adds a variety of features from Apple’s iOS used on the iPhone, iPod touch, and iPad.

With Google revamping its smartphone Android OS for the tablet platform in the 3.0 Honeycomb version, Hewlett-Packard touting how its new webOS works across smartphones and tablets, and Microsoft talking about how Windows Phone 7 supports various Xbox games, operating systems that share features across device platforms are becoming a key component of the next generation of operating systems.

Philip Schiller, Apple’s senior vice president of worldwide product marketing, said the "iPad has inspired a new generation of innovative features in Lion."

Avi Greengart, an analyst with industry research firm Current Analysis, pointed out that, while iOS and Lion remain "fairly distinctive" from each other, Apple is moving what he called "iOS’ greatest hits" to the Mac.

One of those features is the recently launched Mac App Store, which now offers one-click access to apps for the Mac, similar to the groundbreaking App Store for Apple’s mobile devices. In Lion, access to the Mac App Store is built in.

With so many apps easily obtained, Greengart noted, "those apps need a place to live so they don’t become buried in the Applications folder." Lion offers LaunchPad, which shows apps as they would appear on the home screen of an iOS device. And Mission Control merges Expose, Dashboard and Spaces to give an integrated overview of all apps and windows running on the Mac.

While the iPhone, iPod touch, and iPad have touch-sensitive screens, Macs do not. But the new MacBook Pros released Thursday have larger touchpads, and Greengart noted that Lion will support "a lot more gestures" for navigation and other control. Some of those gestures are currently supported in Mac OS X Snow Leopard, but Lion is expected to make the interaction more akin to how Apple’s mobile devices work.

Lion also supports full-screen view of applications, as in mobile devices. This allows a PDF, for instance, to be read without the visual cluttering of a menu from the app or icons in the dock.

There’s also auto-save in Lion to automatically preserve changes in a file. A lock prevents saving, if you so wish, and a revert function returns to the original document. The new Mail 5 features a user-interface design that is similar to the one found in the iPad.

Greengart noted that the integration of some iOS features into Lion is "not a momentous" merging of the two, but represents "a flourishing of desktop innovation" for a platform - laptop and desktop computers - that "has been lagging in innovation for some time."

Google Tweaks Search To Punish ’Low-Quality’ Sites

Google says it has tweaked the formulas steering its Internet search engine to take the rubbish out of its results. The overhaul is designed to lower the rankings of what Google deems "low-quality" sites.

That could be a veiled reference to such sites as Demand Media’s eHow.com, which critics call online "content farms" - that is, sites producing cheap, abundant, mostly useless content that ranks high in search results.

Sites that produce original content or information that Google considers valuable are supposed to rank higher under the new system.

The change announced late Thursday affects about 12 percent, or nearly one in every eight, search requests in the U.S. Google Inc. said the new ranking rules eventually will be introduced in other parts of the world, too. The company tweaks its search algorithms, or formulas, hundreds of times a year, but it said many of the changes are so subtle that only a few people notice them. This latest change is "pretty big," the company said in a blog post.

"Google depends on the high-quality content created by wonderful websites around the world, and we do have a responsibility to encourage a healthy web ecosystem," Google fellow Amit Singhal and principal engineer Matt Cutts wrote in a blog post. "Therefore, it is important for high-quality sites to be rewarded, and that’s exactly what this change does."

Demand Media, based in Santa Monica, assigns roughly 13,000 freelance writers to produce stories about frequently searched topics and then sells ads alongside the content at its own websites, including eHow.com and Livestrong.com, and about 375 Internet other destinations operated by its partners. Articles range from the likes of "How to Tie Shoelaces" to "How to Bake a Potato" and more. The company doesn’t seem agree with the "content farm" or "content mill" definition.

In a blog post, Demand Media’s executive vice president of media and operations, Larry Fitzgibbon, said the company applauds changes that search engines make "to improve the consumer experience," and he said Demand Media focuses on creating "useful and original content."

He added that Demand Media "saw some content go up and some go down in Google search results."

"It’s impossible to speculate how these or any changes made by Google impact any online business in the long term - but at this point in time,

we haven’t seen a material net impact on our Content & Media business," Fitzgibbon wrote.

Google Declares War on Content Farms

Google has announced a major algorithmic change to its search engine, subtle in nature and perhaps unnoticeable to many users, but one that should dramatically improve the quality of Google’s search results.

With this move, Google is targeting content farms - a common name for low quality sites whose main goal is to attract search traffic by piling up (mostly) useless content, usually by either producing large amounts of low-quality text or by copying it from websites with original content.

Google does not go into details of the change which should impact 11.8% of Google’s queries (currently only in the US, with plans to roll it out elsewhere over time), but it does say that it will affect the ranking of many sites on the web.

"This update is designed to reduce rankings for low-quality sites - sites which are low-value add for users, copy content from other websites or sites that are just not very useful. At the same time, it will provide better rankings for high-quality sites - sites with original content and information such as research, in-depth reports, thoughtful analysis and so on," explain Googlers Amit Singhal and Matt Cutts in a blog post.

While the change will surely have many website owners up in arms, complaining that their website was unfairly ranked lower than before (we’re sure that in some cases they will be right), it’s a very welcome one.

The popularity of Google’s search engine is still second to none, but Google has been plagued by black hat SEO practices and content farms for a while now, with the complaints from users slowly mounting over time. If Google manages to put an end to content farms or at least significantly reduce their influence in search results, it will be an important step in regaining the trust of its millions of users.

News Corp. Kicks Off Myspace Sale Process

News Corp. has kicked off the process to explore the sale or spin-off of its troubled social entertainment site, Myspace, a person familiar with the talks said on Thursday.

The media conglomerate has received early interest from around 20 parties so far and expects to receive more inquiries as the process develops in coming weeks.

Reuters reported earlier this month that News Corp. had tapped boutique investment bank Allen & Co. to aid with the process.

News Corp. executives and bankers from Allen & Co. will start talking to interested parties in the second week of March the person said.

Most of the buyout or spin-off interest is expected to come from financial parties such as private equity and venture capital. But possible strategic interest could come from parties such as mobile social networking site MocoSpace and gaming site Zynga. The person said Zynga is currently not in talks with News Corp about Myspace. MocoSpace said earlier this month it was interested in buying Myspace.

News Corp. acquired Myspace in 2005 for $580 million after News Corp. Chief Executive Rupert Murdoch famously swooped in to beat rivals such as MTV owner Viacom Inc in the bidding. But since then, the loss-making website has become increasingly irrelevant as a social network for many users who have migrated to Facebook.

Website A Window into John F. Kennedy’s Oval Office

Any history buff with a computer and Internet connection now has a chance to walk in John F. Kennedy’s shoes - or at least sit, virtually, at the 35th President’s Oval Office desk.

The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library in Boston has launched "The President’s Desk," an interactive website that that seats users at Kennedy’s desk and displays multimedia presentations of aspects of his life and administration.

(To view the website, see: http://microsites.jfklibrary.org/presidentsdesk/)

The displays cover topics ranging from JFK’s experiences as a torpedo boat commander in World War II to his 1960 presidential campaign, to a video in which Kennedy expounds on his love for sailing around Massachusetts’ Cape Cod on his sloop Victura.

Users can dial the Oval Office phone and hear conversations between Kennedy and secretary of defense Robert McNamara, NASA astronaut Gordon Cooper and others.

In one call, Kennedy and former President Dwight Eisenhower talk frankly about how to interpret Russian actions leading up to the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Another button launches an archive of once-secret recordings and transcripts on other sensitive domestic and foreign policy matters including the Vietnam War, nuclear arms testing and the civil rights movement.

Kennedy was the first president to record extensively his meetings and telephone conversations - a practice famously ended during the Nixon administration. He selectively recorded over 12 hours of telephone conversations using a Dictaphone system, according to the library.

Kennedy’s desk was an exact replica of the HMS Resolute desk, made from timbers of the British Arctic expedition ship and presented by Queen Victoria to President Rutherford Hayes in 1878.

The desk disappeared from public view until Jacqueline Kennedy found it in the White House broadcast room and had it installed in the Oval Office in 1961. The desk is still being used by President Barack Obama.

Spyware Compromises 150,000+ Symbian Devices

A new variant of spyware "Spy.Felxispy" on Symbian devices causing privacy leakage has recently been captured by the National Computer Virus Emergency Response Centre of China.

According to NetQin Mobile, there are more than a dozen variants of the spyware since the first was spotted, and the latest has affected 150,000+ devices.

Once installed, the spyware will turn on the Conference Call feature of the device without users' awareness. When users are making phone calls, the spyware automatically adds itself to the call to monitor the conversation.

"The Conference Call feature allows more than two parties to join a conversation, and it's easily available to most smart-phone users. The privacy stealers exploit the vulnerability of this feature for financial purposes. The privacy protection on mobile devices becomes more important than ever," said Dr. Zou Shihong, Vice President of R&D from NetQin.

NetQin Cloud Security Centre detects that the spyware can remotely turn on the speaker on the phone to monitor sounds around users without the users' awareness. Apart from that, the spyware is also capable of synchronizing the messages the user received and delivered to the monitoring phone. These performances will compromise users' privacy.

The privacy stealers usually install the spyware on the phone or send MMS containing the spyware to users to lure them to click. As the spyware is artfully disguised, users will easily be trapped.

NetQin warns that smart-phone users are exposed to more mobile security threats than ever and users should always be cautious whenever performing operations on their mobile devices.

To stay safe, NetQin experts give the following tips in using your phone:

1. Never click open MMS from unknown numbers as they may get your phone infected. Instead, delete them upon receipt.
2. Be on alert for unusual behavior on your phone, such as unusual SMS.
3. Don't leave your phone out of your sight in public environments.
4. Install a trusted security application to protect your phone from security threats.

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